



ANDY TEMPLETON, FOR THE REGISTER

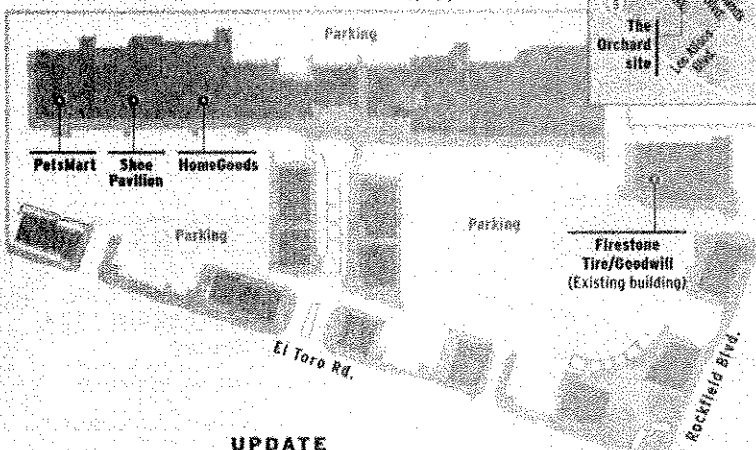
**NEW LOOK:** The renovation of El Toro Road means the 1960s-vintage Saddleback Valley Plaza will soon be history.

# Road on rebound

Lake Forest expects new shopping center to rev up main thoroughfare.

## The Orchard at Saddleback

Construction is under way on a craftsman-style shopping center with 279,000 square-feet of stores and restaurants that will replace the aging Saddleback Valley Plaza that once drew crowds but turned into a shopping ghost town.



### UPDATE

Source: Westtrust  
The Register

#### BACKGROUND

For the past decade, El Toro Road — once a thriving business district — has deteriorated as shopping centers aged and businesses left.

#### TODAY

City leaders and developers will hold the groundbreaking at 1 p.m. for The Orchard at Saddleback, a 279,000-square-foot center on the site of the dilapidated Saddleback Valley Plaza.

#### WHAT'S NEXT

Massive road construction and landscaping along El Toro will be completed this year, when The Orchard's first businesses are expected to open.

By JIM RADCLIFFE  
and SAM MILLER  
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

#### LAKE FOREST

**E**l Toro Road is trenches, rubble, piles of dirt and even more backed-up traffic than usual.

But a one-mile stretch just northeast of the San Diego (I-5) Freeway is getting a major shine that should return the street to a place for locals to hang out and spend money.

A \$27 million face-lift of El Toro Road is half-done. City officials say the project will unclog traffic, add landscaping and spur development of sagging shopping centers along both sides of what is the town's Main Street.

And at 1 p.m. today, city officials and developers will pull out shovels and break ground for an extreme makeover of the dilapidated Saddleback Valley Plaza, a massive shopping center built in 1968.

The new center, The Orchard at Saddleback, will have 279,000 square-feet of restaurants and shops such as Pet-



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**CONSTRUCTION:** Lake Forest officials are counting on a "domino effect" from a shopping center that will replace the old Saddleback Valley Plaza on El Toro Road.

## EL TORO: Comics out, wicker in

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### sMart and HomeGoods.

"We want that domino effect to happen," Assistant City Manager Mark Pulone said. "I think we are seeing it right now. El Toro Road is not going to look at all what it looks like now in 10 years."

Many of the improvements are expected much sooner. Consider:

- The roadwork is scheduled to be completed in November.
- A shuttered K-Mart was torn down, tentatively for a Home Depot that could go up as soon as next year.

City officials say other developers are in preliminary talks with them about redoing other El Toro centers.

But the linchpin to any resurgence of El Toro Road is The Orchard at Saddleback, the largest property along the stretch.

Charles Smith, president of the developer, Westrust, said the new center will reflect changes shopping centers have undergone since Saddleback Valley Plaza was built on the site in 1968.

The Orchard won't have stairways leading to second stories, and it will include anchor stores to draw in customers instead of just being a collection of small shops and restaurants. And the project will be built as one instead of two separate wings.

Of course, there are growing pains to upgrading the center.

Don Allen owns Comic Quest, a comic-book store in the old plaza that will move out in part because of an expected leap in rent.

"I mean, having lived there forever, one part is you're happy to see things look better," Allen said.

"For us, though, it's a disaster. We could stay here, but the anchors and the tenants don't fit our client base. Moms buying wicker chairs aren't going to come in to buy a comic book."

Locals, who have told City Hall over the years that congested and dilapidated El Toro Road was a top concern in town, are hopeful.

"When the theaters were there, we went," said Sandra Casado, who lives near El Toro.

"After K-Mart closed down, it kind of had an abandoned feeling in that area," she said. "Businesses were just disappearing. Not knowing exactly what's coming, it's hard to say (what to expect), but I'm sure it'll improve things."

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